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SUBJECT Full Text

MARVIN KALB: A truck carrying explosives crashed into the U.S. Embassy Marine compound in Beirut, Lebanon today, killing perhaps as many as 120 Marines.

Our guests today, to discuss this tragedy and its implications, are Senator Sam Nunn, ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee; and Eric Rouleau, for 30 years the chief Middle East correspondent for Le Monde, one of France's most prestigious publications.

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KALB: In the wake of the explosion in Beirut, Lebanon this morning that killed perhaps as many as 120 U.S. Marines and wounded many others, our guests today on Meet the Press are Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, considered the most influential Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, and Eric Rouleau, who for 30 years has been the chief Middle East correspondent for the French newspaper Le Monde.

Our reporters today are Morton Kondracke of The New Republic, Suzanne Garment of The Wall Street Journal, Robert Novak of The Chicago Sun-Times, and to open the questioning, our regular panelist, Bill Monroe of NBC News.

BILL MONROE: Senator, do you have any information on this incident that we might not have at this point?

SENATOR SAM NUNN: Bill, the latest information I have is they have confirmed about 120 Marines dead and there are over 100, probably around 112, wounded. Some of those wounded could move into what we call the KIA category, or killed in action, in

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the near or the coming hours. So that's the latest information I have.

MONROE: You originally opposed our putting these Marines into Lebanon. What is your reaction to this news?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, my first reaction is one of great sympathy to the families of the brave men that were killed. My second reaction is that we need to do everything possible now to protect those Marines who are still in Lebanon because we have a unit that has been literally decimated. That unit has taken between 15 and 20 percent casualties. In Vietnam or any other war we would consider that unit almost ineffective at this stage. So the second point I would like to make is we've got to augment that unit and we've got to do it very rapidly because they're in their most exposed positions now.

MONROE: What do you mean, augment the unit?

SENATOR NUNN: We've got to at least have some people come back to the ground from the ships. The Marines have got to have a unit that has what we call unit integrity. That means command. That means clear-cut line of authority. We don't even know now how many of the people who were in charge of the unit, the top officers, remain there. So that is the first step.

MONROE: You're not talking about adding more Marines to the overall total of about 1600 we had there?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I felt that the unit we had there was woefully inadequate for the mission they'd been given. But that's not the immediate problem. The immediate problem is to at least have as capable a unit there in the next few hours as we had there before this tragedy.

MONROE: Do you feel there's any reason to believe that this kind of attack could have been anticipated and security improved so that it could not have taken place?

SENATOR NUNN: I have no way of judging the security. I think we'll have to get all the facts. It seems to me to be strange that that truck was able to go through those checkpoints. But it's my understanding that they chose the entrance that was most unlikely from the point of view of Marine planning. It is also my understanding that the entrance that they crashed through was about a hundred yards from the actual building. So it was a very exposed position.

The bottom line is our Marines have been in an untenable military position. They remain in an untenable military position. And I think we've got to look very seriously. I think the

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President owes the nation and the Marine Corps and our national security a quick but a very thoughtful analysis of our situation there now. I don't think we've had that in the past.

KALB: Thank you, gentlemen.

We'll be back with more questions for Senator Sam Nunn and Eric Rouleau.

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ROBERT NOVAK: Senator Nunn, I just want to follow up one part of the questioning of you by Mr. Monroe. You left the impression that for the future you would advocate an increase, an overall aggregate increase in the number of Marines in Lebanon. Do you think that would make their position more tenable?

SENATOR NUNN: I'm not talking about the long term. I tried to make it very clear I'm talking about in the next few hours. We've got a very exposed position there. We've got a unit that's been decimated. We have security forces that must be in disarray. We have Marines that are also under attack at the University of Beirut, I understand, which is not a comfortable situation. So I'm talking about the immediate next few hours.

In the longer term, I have a totally different view. I think the President -- in the long view, the President should try to get the United Nations forces. I would like to do it immediately. I would like to see the United Nations forces that are in the northern part of Lebanon now move in and augment our Marines and eventually replace those Marines. That has been my view from the very beginning.

NOVAK: So when would you like to see the Marines out of Lebanon?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, as soon as we can first protect them, make sure we don't suffer any more casualties. We don't want to be seen doing things in the short term that would increase their exposure. But I would like to see an augmentation by the U.N. forces and a replacement by them, hopefully in the next few weeks.

NOVAK: Mr. Rouleau, there has been a lot of speculation by Administration officials in the past few hours that this atrocity, this act of terrorism was committed by Iranian sources. Do you, with your knowledge of the Lebanese situation, think that is an accurate appraisal?

ERIC ROULEAU: You see, I don't think at this point we can judge who did it. But there are at least two organizations

which have the capabilities of doing in. One of them is this Shiite pro-Iranian group. And the other one, which is, I think, a much larger organization called the National Resistance Movement, the Lebanese National Resistance Movement, in Lebanon, which has been active in the South of Lebanon now for a year and has killed something like 130 or 140 Israeli soldiers and wounded scores of them.

This organization, I know, took a decision around the 15th of September to organize attacks against American Marines and French soldiers even if a cease-fire was concluded. At that time there was no cease-fire. And the reason why they decided to do that is that they considered the Americans and the French as not an impartial force.

If you'll remember, when the multinational force came into Lebanon a year ago, there was a national consensus for it. All the Lebanese wanted it. Now, rightly or wrongly, the French and Americans appear as if they are part of the civil war in favor of the government of Mr. Gemayel.

NOVAK: In your opinion, is it significant that the Italians were not attacked?

ROULEAU: I didn't expect the Italians to be attacked. I wrote an article three or four weeks ago saying that only the Americans and French would be attacked, for the simple reason that the Italians have remained very noncommittal and they were neutral in this conflict and they don't appear -- again I repeat, they are not perceived as supporting a faction in Lebanon, Mr. Gemayel's faction.

SUZANNE GARMENT: Senator Nunn, let me press just once more on the question of U.S. force in Lebanon. There are still many people in Washington talking about how to get the Marines out. The U.S. Government has said that it does not want to participate directly and intimately in the political talks that are to come. When we give signals like this, don't we increase the talk among the factions in Lebanon that it is possible to scare America away?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I don't know, but I believe that we must look towards our own interest. We are spread too thin all over the world. If we had a legitimate and a precise military mission in Lebanon, then certainly casualties like this should not deter us. But the President has defined our mission in Lebanon as having the Marines participate in the effort to clear Lebanon of all foreign forces. That is mission impossible. It has been mission impossible from the very beginning.

So I would submit we must look to our own security. I

submit we must protect the Marines that are there. But I think that we must find a way to replace them. We are no longer a deterrent force in Lebanon. We are a target. Our Marines are targets. They are much more hostages than they are a deterrent.

GARMENT: If after his analysis the President nevertheless decides to ask for more troops, what is your guess about what your colleagues in the Senate would say to him?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I do not know. The Senate had a long debate on the 18-month. I did not favor that because the President had never precisely defined the mission. He still has not. It seems to me that we ought to go back to the drawing boards and say, "Mr. President, what are the Marines doing there, and under what terms would they be withdrawn?"

I have not gotten anyone in this Administration to even tell me what success is -- that is, under what conditions we could say the Marines have fulfilled their mission. Now let's have them depart.

But I repeat, the first thing is to protect the Marines who are there. Second, I think we ought to get the United Nations forces to replace them in an orderly way.

MORTON KONDRACK: Senator Nunn, in 1958 President Eisenhower sent 10,000 Marines into Lebanon and accomplished the purpose for which they went there. Why is not a similar show of force appropriate in this day and age?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, Congress Gibbons, in the House debate -- I believe it was Congressman Gibbons -- said that we have too few Marines there to fight and too many to die. I think that's exactly where we are now. So if the President does not choose to go the U.N. route, which I suggest, it seems to me he's got two choices. One choice is to pull most Marines out, put them on the ships, leave a very small symbolic force there that would admittedly be exposed. The second choice is precisely what you indicate, is to greatly beef up the force, to increase the perimeter -- that is, the overall security of the force by increasing the protected area. And that would require probably five to ten thousand Marines.

As far as going in with 20,000 troops right now, I think you'd first of all have to identify who they were going to fight. I think it would be very difficult to do that under the present conditions. Finding the enemy, identifying the enemy, knowing which faction to take on, it seems to me, would be a military planner's absolute nightmare. So I would be exposed to that.

KONDRACK: Well, the President has said on various

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occasions that the purpose of having the Marines there is to prevent the Syrians from taking over -- the Syrians, as he said, backed by the Soviets, from taking over the country. Now, is that a correct assessment of the situation, and is it worth the use of American power to accomplish that end?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I don't know if that's what the President has in mind. That was not the goal that he had in mind when he came to the Senate and asked for our 18-month extension. He said the goal there was not just to clear the Syrians out, but all foreign forces in Lebanon, including the Israelis, the PLO, everyone. Now, that is the goal we are now operating under.

If the President simply wanted to clear the Syrians out, it seems to me we're on a strange kind of negotiating pattern. Because as I read it, we are basing a lot of our negotiations on the assumption that we're going to convince the Syrians to pull out voluntarily. The strange thing that's going on while we're doing that and we have that assumption -- which I find questionable, by the way -- the President, it seems to me, about every three days blasts the Syrians with some new indictment. That does not seem to me to be consistent with the assumption that they are going to cooperate.

KALB: Mr. Rouleau, Senator Nunn mentioned a couple of minutes ago that the U.S. mission at this point can almost be described as mission impossible. From your own experience in Lebanon, do you think that mission is impossible, or is it a valid one? Should we be there?

ROULEAU: Well, first I think one should remind -- we should remind ourselves what the mission is about. When this multinational force went there, it wasn't to throw out any foreign forces out of Lebanon or to take part in the civil war. It was just for peace-keeping in the Beirut area and protect the civilian population. That was all. Now we're talking...

KALB: And that, you think, was a valid effort.

ROULEAU: It was a valid effort because, mainly, all the Lebanese were for it. I think we should work on those lines. If there's a consensus for multinational forces, it's a protection for our forces.

If at one point, like it is the case today, a majority of Lebanese perceive us as a foreign intervention force trying to support one faction against all the other factions, I think it's a very dangerous thing to do. And anyway, it's outside the mandate.

KALB: How do you know it's a majority? How do you know it's a majority?

ROULEAU: Well, the majority is because the Gemayel group, faction which is in power is openly contested by all the other factions, whether they are Muslim or some Christian factions. Maronite factions are against Gemayle, like former President Franjieh, Raymond Edley (?). There are Druze. There are Shiah's. And so it's very easy, I think, to conclude that there's a majority of Lebanese who would like to settle their affairs amongst themselves. And we appear as if we're interfering in their affairs.

MONROE: Senator, did I understand you to say a little while ago that you had a report that Marines were under attack or are under attack this morning at the University of Beirut?

SENATOR NUNN: Yes, that was my information. But the information is very sketchy, and that's about all I know about it.

MONROE: What kind of attack?

SENATOR NUNN: I can't give you many more details than that. Certainly not the kind of massive, explosive situation we had develop near the airport, but certainly sniper fire and, I understand, small-arms fire.

MONROE: You've talked about withdrawing Marines, Senator. What about the factor that this attack makes it harder to withdraw because if we withdrew the Marines in the immediate future it would appear that we were giving in to a terrorist attack?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, first of all, I'm not saying we ought to immediately withdraw. Immediately, we need to shore up what we've got there now and protect our people.

Second, we need to have a phased withdrawal, with the United Nations taking our place.

So you're correct. If we simply put the Marines on the ships and pulled out, I think it would be very bad. But this has been a disaster waiting to happen. It was apparent when the cease-fire was declared that that was the time for the President to redefine our mission. The President has not redefined that mission. It is still very, very broad. And in my view, unless you define that mission to be one of having the Marines there until the U.N. can take over or until the Lebanese Army can take over, then you have defined an open-ended mission.

MONROE: Mr. Rouleau, you said that you wrote an article a few weeks ago that a specific organization in Lebanon was planning this kind of attack on the French troops and on the

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American troops, which has now taken place. What kind of organization? Who are these people?

ROULEAU: They are a very mysterious organization. I don't think they ever held a press conference or ever met -- no official representative met the press. But I get their handouts in Paris, and around the 15th or 20th of September I met maybe not a representative, a formal representative, but somebody very close to them. And this man told me that they had taken a decision around the 15th of September, a political decision, to attack the Americans and the French, to get out all the multinational forces and get -- I'm very happy to hear the Senator say that because I think it's quite a widespread view in Lebanon amongst Lebanese. They would like to have United Nations forces, because at least they have a feeling they are neutral forces, they're not going to interfere in the internal domestic affairs.

And to answer a question, the decision was taken around the 15th of September to attack, and I expected attacks. But I must confess I didn't expect such a murderous, such a tragic bomb attack at this one. I thought they were going to snipe and kill American and French soldiers.

NOVAK: Mr. Rouleau, from your experience as a journalist, do you think the perception that you describe of the Lebanese that the Americans and the French are not evenhanded that they have been tilting to one side is a correct and accurate perception?

ROULEAU: Well, I think the American Government is Americans. I mean the American Government considers Mr. Gemayel as the legitimate government of Lebanon, not the legal. There's a big difference in the two. I mean there's legal and there is legitimacy.

You see, in a civil war it's very difficult to speak of legitimacy, because by definition in a civil war you have groups warring each other and the legitimacy of a government is being contested. So by the fact of saying that Gemayel is legitimate is already taking sides. Number one.

Number two, in action, the American Government has been supplying an awful lot of armaments to the Lebanese Army, training the Lebanese Army, which is perceived, again -- I don't think wrongly -- by the Muslim factions as a Christian Phalangist army. It's not a neutral army, it's the army of Mr. Gemayel.

And therefore I think, at least on the American side, I think the American Government is taking sides.

NOVAK: Senator Nunn, two of your colleagues, Senator Hatch and Senator Zorinsky, several weeks ago came back from Syria with a report which they submitted to the White House to the effect that Syria would cooperate with a multinational force that apparently did not contain the United States. Do you think that is an accurate assessment and that we should be moving on that grounds in an agreement with Syria in Lebanon?

SENATOR NUNN: I really don't believe I can make a judgment on that. I have not talked to the senators in depth. I've had only passing conversations with them on that subject. I did read the articles about it. I'm not in a position to make a judgment on it.

I do believe, however, that as long as we have U.S. Marines sitting there that are in effect hostages, not only to the Syrians, but of many other factions in Lebanon, our bargaining position vis-a-vis Syria is much weaker than it would be than if we were offshore.

GARMENT: Mr. Rouleau, did you learn anything about the connections of this group, who they know?

ROULEAU: You mean the National Resistance Lebanese group?

GARMENT: Who aids them?

ROULEAU: Yes. I mean I know it's a multi-confessional group. There are people from all religions. There are Muslims, there are Christians, Greek Orthodox Catholics, Maronites. It's a nationalist leftist-oriented group which I think Communists are playing an important role in that group. It's very well-knitted, very well-organized. And as I mentioned before, they have killed many Israelis successfully, in the sense that they were successful in their preparation. And I think it was one of the reasons why Mr. Begin withdrew the troops behind the Awali. He could not face them. They're well-organized, they're very secret.

So, I think that we -- unfortunately, we are going to hear more of them in the future.

GARMENT: When you say Communist, did you learn anything more specific about which variety of...

ROULEAU: I think members of the Communist Party in Lebanon are in it, in the leadership. I don't know how important they are, but I know at least one who's connected with that organization.

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KONDRACKE: Well, when you mention the word Communist, one naturally thinks of the Soviet Union. Is the Sov -- let me ask this both about the immediate organization and about the geopolitical situation. If the United States really does pull out, do we leave the region open for Soviet influence to increase?

ROULEAU: No, I don't think this is a possibility, either for the French or the American Government.

I think the French Government has exactly the view of the Senator, that this is too big a job for us. The civil war in Lebanon is terrible. I mean nobody has ever entered Lebanon and gone out successfully.

No, I think the only way out -- I think the Senator is absolutely right on this -- is to organize a significant force from the United Nations to replace the French and Americans and the British and the Italians, and make sure that peace-keeping would be the job of the United Nations, not of...

KONDRACKE: Except that whenever in the Middle East the U.N. has been required to do a peace-keeping mission, basically, they've been a sieve. They've allowed whatever terrorist groups were in the vicinity to right through and occupy whatever territory they occupied.

What evidence do you have that the U.N. could do the job this time?

ROULEAU: Well, I think the question can be discussed, examined, and maybe the numbers would be more important. But you see, what is more important in all this -- you see, you are alluding to the fact that United Nations troops were in the South of Lebanon and let the Palestinian Fedayeen go into the region. But this was a very particular situation. There was this Fedayeen-Israeli confrontation.

Today we are facing another situation. We are facing a situation where most Lebanese -- I would say practically all Lebanese -- would like to see peace and order in their own country. And they want to look to people in whom they feel confident. And you can only feel confident, if you are a Lebanese, when you are facing a United Nations force. You know they have no ax to grind, they have no imperial objectives, or whatever. I think it will have a much bigger chance to succeed this time than in the times you are referring to.

MONROE: Senator, as you know, the Marines in the Beirut area have been subjected in recent days to sniper attack. In a remarkably brutal aspect of this present situation, the rescuers

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around those ruins are being sniped at. Do you have any formula for protection of the Marines from sniping? Is there anything the Marines ought to be doing about this, some inhibition on them now removed?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, if you wanted to protect them, you have to have a much broader perimeter. You cannot put them in the low ground, where they are around the airport, and expect them to be protected. Even the huge amount of firepower we have off the shore will not deter those kind of attacks because we're not going to blow up Beirut if we get three Marines killed with sniper fire. We can't have that kind of massive retaliation against innocent people. We don't have a way to protect them where they are now. They're in an untenable military situation.

MONROE: Should we expand that perimeter?

SENATOR NUNN: I'd think that would be unwise. If the President will not go toward the United Nations, then that may be the only choice. But I think it is an unwise choice.

NOVAK: Senator Nunn, the burden of Mr. Rouleau's remarks is that there's a perception in Lebanon that our forces have not been objective. Do you think that the U.S. Marine forces, under the direction of our government, went wrong in siding toward the Gemayel government instead of being a neutral force?

SENATOR NUNN: It's a close question because to the extent that we returned fire, we were protecting our own people. You have to protect your own people. And I think the French did the same thing. But I believe the unfortunate perception is we were siding with the government. I believe that's an erroneous perception, but I think it is the perception.

GARMENT: Senator, do you think that it's in the U.S. interest to stop favoring the government against its enemies?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, that assumes that I think we already have started favoring the government against its enemies. I don't go that far. I think we've tried to be a peace-keeping force. But the problem is a superpower, by its very nature, has great difficulty being perceived as totally impartial.

KALB: Thank you very much, Senator Nunn and Mr. Eric Rouleau, for being with us today on Meet the Press.